

Lent 5
22/3/2026

Mark the Evangelist

Psalm 130
John 11:1-44

Stop. Being. Dead. (On the irrelevance of miracles II)

In a sentence:

Most strangely, we are told this story of a miracle, so that we might stop “believing in miracles”. We are rather to become a miracle.

Last week, I began and ran with the notion that miracles are pointless. This was rightly contested. My point should have been more precisely put: *stories* about miracles are pointless, to the extent that they are accounts of marvellous things which others once “received”, told so that we might believe that such marvellous things might happen to us. Faith is not believing in miracles.

Miracles, whether such things happen or not, matter to us because they constitute the power to be somewhere else. A miracle is transport to a different reality – a reality where I’m not sick, where she’s not dead, in which the exam has been cancelled or where our team has finally won a premiership. In our imagination, miracles are about what we’ve lately called “relevance”. They are about *relief*: a restoration to life in greater fullness. The prayer for a miracle is always a prayer for life in the face of the very real presence of death and all his friends. If we think less about miracles today, it’s because we have found other means to this kind of relief; the power to perform miracles in the way of the magic trick has given way to social and mechanical technologies which do what once we prayed to the gods that they would do. It’s partly for this reason that the miracle stories of the Gospels are strange to us today. We would love such things to break into our lives here and now, but most of us have already ruled out the possibility of such delight and made ourselves responsible for delivering the good things we long for.

Last week we heard the story of the miraculous healing of a man born blind; this week it’s the raising of the dead Lazarus. This is perhaps the greatest of all the miracles recounted in the Gospels, apart from the resurrection of Jesus himself, which should be bracketed out as something in a category of its own.

In both stories, the Evangelist John goes into considerable detail. This is itself remarkable; it’s clearly not enough in John’s mind simply to say, “And while he was in Bethany, Jesus raised a man who had been dead 4 days”. This would have been enough if the point were just to say that Jesus could do such things. Rather, the miracle is recounted with all the interactions of the actors and their interpretations. It seems that the raising of Lazarus is not quite the central takeaway of the story.

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: John 11.1-44)

Word: Proclamation

From one perspective, and at the risk of saying something absurd, there is nothing particularly relieving – relevant – in the raising of Lazarus, in itself. It would be, of course, a surprising and remarkable thing to happen, but Lazarus will die again. Grief has given way to joy for a while, but Martha or Mary or someone else will again stand outside Lazarus’ tomb and grieve, perhaps all the more so because of this miracle’s

limited effect. If all that happens is that Lazarus is resuscitated, then our concern for relief from death is only postponed. This is surely nice, but death's shadow lingers still.

John's point in telling the story is deeper. Lazarus is not the only one raised in the story. Just as important as a man who lived and died might live a little longer is that life might be breathed into those dead who are *still* breathing, entombed in a dark world. Martha is such a one, as is Mary, and as are we. The reported raising of Lazarus catches our attention, but the raising is not the main point of *telling* the story. Just as miraculous is the possibility that faith might be resurrected in Martha. Just as Lazarus is roused from 'sleep' (v.11f) so also is Martha called to faith. They are, in the story, co-hearers of the same word: "Come out". The story is told, then, *not* to suggest that we will believe in Jesus all the more strongly if he should raise one of our dead. The point is that we – still living – are dead with Lazarus, and Jesus would raise *even us*, here and now.

And so we need to be explicit about another thing. Lazarus comes forth, not as a *basis* of Martha's faith, not as a *reason* for her belief, as if her belief were that Jesus could do such cool stuff. The raising of Lazarus is rather the illustration of what it means to confess properly Jesus as 'Messiah', and 'Son of God', and 'the one coming into the world', as Mary did earlier in the story (v.27). Or to put it differently, the point of the story is not that, by raising Lazarus, Jesus proves to Martha that her doctrines about him are true. If that *were* the point then it merely leaves *us* with nothing but a story about what happened to someone else, and implies that *we* couldn't come to belief without a similar spectacle. Rather, and most strangely, we are told this story of a miracle, so that we might *stop* "believing in miracles". "I am the resurrection", Jesus says, not "I will be raised."

It's interesting – even surprising – that, despite the lament of Martha and her sister, we don't hear of their response to the raising of their well-dead brother. Perhaps it's obvious, at the personal and emotional level. Yet the whole exchange has not been about grief and joy, not about a particular loss and restoration, but about unbelief and belief. Jesus rebukes Martha when she protests at the opening of the stinking tomb: 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' There is a promise made here to the faithful, along the lines of last week's lesson: 'believing is seeing' (which is *not* 'seeing is believing').

But we should push this a step further: believing is not affirmation that there "is" a God or that Jesus could do glorious and miraculous things. To believe is to *become* the glory of God. The human being unbound by death – whether our own or the death of someone or something we love – such a person is 'the glory of God'. And so Jesus says the very odd thing: 'Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die (11.25f)'. The hearts of such faithful ones will one day stop beating, but such death is as nothing(!) to those who are truly alive before death finally arrives. This is the miracle which is hardest of all to believe in: the possibility of life in the midst of death, the possibility of life *even though* Lazarus has died. This is hard to believe because when Lazarus dies, so also do his sisters, Martha and Mary. We are part of each other in that way, such that the death of those we love is an amputation, a laming, a marking of our continuing lives with death.

The story of Lazarus addresses just this: what are we to do with the death that is ever in our midst, and debilitates us so? The answer is not, "Believe in miracles". The answer is, "Be Lazarus". Strange as it seems to say it, the "faith" which matters in the story is that of the dead Lazarus himself. He is the first one to make a faithful response to the call of God in Christ, awakening from his 'sleep'. As one raised from the encumbrances of death, Lazarus is the true believer. His faithful response to Christ's command models what should be Martha's, and our own response: to rise, to shine, to bask in the glory of

the God who calls us forth, and to *become* that glory in a world which cries out desperately, 'Lord, if you had been here, he...she...we would not have died.'

We are not to be Martha, waiting for a miracle. We are to be Lazarus, the miracle, the glory of God.

Sleepers, awake; Stop. Being. Dead. And become the glory of God, which is the Body of Christ alive, dead and alive again.
